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BOOK REVIEWS.

The Diary of James K. Polk during his Presidency, 1845 to 1849.

Now first printed from the original manuscript in the collections of the Chicago Historical Society. Edited and annotated by MILO MILTON QUAlFE, Assistant Professor in the Lewis Institute of Technology, with an introduction by ANDREW CUNNINGHAM McLAUGHLIN, Head of the Department of History of the University of Chicago. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1910. 4 vols. Pp. xxxii, 498; 494; 508; 462.)

The publication of the Diary of President Polk may without overstatement be described as an event of extremely great importance in the literature of American history and government. The original manuscript was for some years in the possession of the Chicago Historical Society and a faithful copy of it, prepared under the direction of George Bancroft (who had planned a history of Polk's administration), is in the New York Public Library, Lenox Building. Recently the Congressional Library has acquired the Polk Collection from the Chicago Historical Society. This includes a number of Polk's letters and added to the mass of Polk correspondence already in the Library comprises an unusually complete body of materials.

"Who knows or cares anything about the personality of James K. Polk or Franklin Pierce?" asked Mr. Bryce (*Am. Commonwealth*, I, 78). "The only thing remarkable about them is that being so commonplace they should have climbed so high." This is the modern equivalent of the Whig campaign cry, "Who is Polk?" Assuredly Polk was not wholly commonplace. Even Von Holst admitted that. The Presidency is largely what the President makes it. Polk showed what a determined, industrious, withal partisan President might do when not handicapped by an ambition for reelection. The diary is more than a human document; it is a first-hand account of the Presidency from 1845 to 1849.

The diary begins August 26, 1845 and continues with scarcely a

break to May 1849, when Polk returned to Tennessee after the expiration of his term. How trustworthy is it, and to what extent may it be depended upon as material for history? The popular verdict has been against Polk and it will be used by some as a series of admissions by the defendant. Its positive trustworthiness may be indicated by answering two questions. Was it composed with an eye to future publication as a personal and political vindication? How far did Polk's personality interfere unconsciously to color his impressions? In answer to the first no one after reading the diary will dispute the conclusion of Professor McLaughlin that it "does not appear to have been written with the expectation that it would be conned by future historians. It lacks, therefore, affected self-consciousness at least" (I, xiii). There is, so far as the reviewer is aware, no external evidence to the contrary and Polk's statement that he kept the diary for the purpose of aiding his own memory is justified by a reading of the several volumes. His expression of this purpose answers in large part the query as to the personal equation. The diary opens with an account of a conversation with Buchanan upon the Oregon question. "This conversation was of so important a character that I deemed it proper on the same evening to reduce the substance of it to writing for the purpose of retaining it more distinctly in my memory. . . . It was this circumstance which first suggested to me the idea, if not the necessity, of keeping a journal or diary of events and transactions which might occur during my presidency" (II, 301). The diary is, therefore, remarkably free from subjective impressions; it is a memorandum of each day's events and a digest of conversations. But twice during the four years does it seem to have been "written up" at a later day. Polk constantly referred to it, as John Quincy Adams did his, to the discomfort of less accurate persons, in order to refresh his recollection of interviews, not infrequently of those with the vacillating Buchanan. The diary, then, is systematic, precise, hard, and narrow in scope. It never leaves for long the main business in hand. Its principal digression is the iterated expression of disgust for office-seekers. It gives a final rebuke to the phrase of "Polk the mendacious." Imagination is a necessary ingredient in the character of the preverter of truth. The diary proves by every page that Polk had no imagination. Perhaps it is this utter lack of imagination, this narrowness, which leaves upon the reader the feeling of depression. As a record of conversations one may rely upon the diary, for remembering Polk's purpose in keeping

it, and his systematic pursuit of his purpose, there was no cause for distortion or suppression. Somewhat otherwise is it as a commentary upon the persons of the time. Polk was an uncompromising Jacksonian democrat. His political opponents were "Federalist" foes, whom he seems to have regarded, Jackson-like, not only as private enemies but almost as public nuisances. Regularity in the Democratic party was necessary to win his favor or to keep it. Of all else he was suspicious, of Barnburners, and of "southern agitators" like Calhoun (IV, 299). Those he trusted most were regular Democrats like himself: J. Y. Mason, Johnson, Bancroft, and Clifford in the Cabinet; Cass, Douglas, Bright, McLane, and Pillow out of it. Of Buchanan Polk gives no favorable impression; although "able" he is in large things constantly playing for popular favor, in small he is "without judgment and sometimes acts like an old maid" (IV, 337). Polk seemed to rely upon his old college-mate, Mason, more than any one else in his Cabinet. He had few personal friends and at times appears pathetic in his loneliness. He was partial to, and tolerant of, those who professed a similar political faith. He distrusted all who opposed him and looked askance at those whom he believed to be sacrificing party principles for personal ambition, like Calhoun, or even Buchanan. Polk's judgments upon the men of his own party, it may be believed, are to be relied upon rather than those upon his opponents. His innate suspicion neutralizes his otherwise favorable predilections for his political friends.

The introduction by Professor McLaughlin is adequate and, of course, interesting. Mr. Quaife has a modest conception of the functions of an editor. One often wishes his notes were fuller and more frequent. The index is highly inadequate. The editor set out to give a faithful reading of the manuscript and this he has done. It is printed in attractive type upon excellent paper—a handsome set of books deserving a place beside John Quincy Adams's diary and Beaton's *Thirty Years' View*, to both of which it will serve as a corrective.

JESSE S. REEVES.